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THE COAL MINES OF PENNSYLVANIA

BY OWEN R. LOVEJOY,
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The coal mining industry is one of the most important industries in our country; and while, because of its localization, it does not affect the lives of so many people as many other industries, where it is located there is an intensity of industrial interest; there is usually a congestion in the living conditions of the people; and there are wage problems and living problems quite as serious as those that affect any of our other industries.

It should be gratifying to the people of the Birmingham region that the coal industry has developed at so late a day, just as it ought to be gratifying to the people of the Pittsburgh region and of the Eastern Pennsylvania region, that the coal industry there developed at a later day than it did in some other parts of the world.

We have been saved in Pennsylvania the tragedy in young child life that was enacted in England and other European countries a hundred years ago. We have been spared the necessity of learning by experience that it was not only a social outrage but an economic error to allow women and little girls to toil in the darkness of the coal mine. No amount of preaching seemed to teach our English neighbors, but through the experience of years of tragedy and wrong, they learned that it was not wise, that it did not pay from any point of view, to allow little six and eight and ten-year-old girls to work through long hours in the heart of the coal mine, and when the coal mining industry developed in America, the woman and the girl had been almost entirely eliminated from the problem at the beginning.

So we began here in America on a little higher plane than that occupied by our coal mining ancestors across the sea. When the anthracite and bituminous fields of Pennsylvania were opened, it was the custom to employ not little girls, not women, but little boys of very tender years; and up to a few years ago it was quite customary for boys of eight, nine and ten years to be employed inside

the bituminous and anthracite mines, and in larger numbers, in the anthracite field, in the coal breakers and other operations outside the mines.

The fight began on that low plane, and the leading coal operators to-day are ashamed to confess that in the early days their ancestors in the industry fought the efforts to eliminate the little boy—the eight-year-old boy from the coal mine. You meet any intelligent coal operator in Pennsylvania to-day and he will be just as eager to have laws passed that will successfully eliminate young children, as will the so-called typical social worker. As the English on the lower plane learned, so he has learned that the little boy is a bad economic proposition in the coal industry.

The process of improvement has passed through stage after stage of evolutionary development. Seven years ago, when the work of this committee was inaugurated, there were still a great many children of eight years employed in the coal breakers of Pennsylvania, and a large number of children of ten years employed inside the mines. At that time, the law in Pennsylvania forbade the employment of any boy under 14 years of age in the coal breakers and any boy under 16 years inside the anthracite mines.

But the law in Pennsylvania regarding the age of children employed was very much like the law in Alabama to-day; it left it to the imagination of the parent and the credulity of the official to determine the age of the child who applied for a permit to work. Sometimes parents found that the years of taking care of the little child had dragged on so heavily that a child of eight years seemed to them to be 14 or 16 years of age. They felt that they had had the little darling in their arms so long now, it must become an adult and add its efforts to those of the natural wage-earners of the family in order to eke out an existence.

I have stood in the offices of notaries public in the State of Pennsylvania within the past six years and have actually seen little boys of eight years, unable to speak a word of English, much less read and write—little boys who had never been in an American school for a day—consigned to the labor of the coal mine three miles from daylight to spend the rest of their lives; and this under an affidavit signed by the parent or guardian testifying that the child was 14 or 16 years of age.

Many harsh things were said about the coal operators during

the early days. No doubt some were quite indifferent, and possibly some connived at violation of the law but the initial defect was in the law itself. The law made it possible for a parent to deposit twenty-five cents and make affidavit to the age of the child, and there were no questions asked. Thus with the seal of the state the transaction was arranged.

After years of agitation it was possible, two years ago, to secure an amendment to the law, and this we are glad to record was secured by the definite and active co-operation of the leading coal operators in the mining sections of Pennsylvania. This law makes it impossible to throw the burden of proof upon the weakest members in the community, the parents of the children who seek their employment. It requires that before a child can be employed, documentary proof of that child's age must be deposited with the issuing official, and based upon that documentary proof a certificate is issued.

Since then the elimination of the eight-year-old child has gone on apace; and while there are probably some infractions of the law even to-day, we are glad to record that there are very few children under 14 years of age now employed in either the bituminous or anthracite mines of Pennsylvania.

Through an unfortunate error in drafting the bill, the age limit for employment inside the anthracite mines, which had been 16 years for some time, was cut to 14 years; but that is to be remedied at this session of the legislature. We already have on record a number of coal operators in favor of fixing the age limit again at 16 years. And many of the larger companies have absolutely refrained from employing children under 16 years even though they are legally permitted to do so.

I had the pleasure to-day of becoming acquainted with one of the leading coal operators of this state, in the Birmingham region, and he protested most vigorously that no child under 16 years should be employed inside any coal mine.

While I have not had the pleasure of meeting any large number engaged in the coal industry in Alabama, let me hold this out as an earnest of the spirit I trust will actuate those engaged in this industry when the question comes up before your legislature. Let us hope not only that the coal operators will refrain from opposition to a law fixing a 16-year limit for

employment inside coal mines, but will come forward as one of the interested parties to promote this kind of legislation.

If they should not do this, and if such a bill should not pass, I believe, that after they have had the experience we have had in some of our northern communities, they would also welcome such a reform, not only for the sake of preserving the lives and health of the children themselves, but from considerations of the larger interests of the community.

The child in such an industry as mining is an unsafe industrial risk, and an expensive hazard.

Recent statistics in the mining reports of Pennsylvania showed, outside the coal mines in the large buildings where the coal is cleaned, (a phase of the industry unnecessary in the bituminous field), that among the boys and men who picked slate, while there were that year approximately an equal number of boys 16 years of age and under, and men above 16, the accidents to boys were three hundred per cent higher than to men and boys above 16. Boys and men were working side by side, performing almost precisely the same kind of work and under the same conditions of danger. It was not that the coal operators put the boys in the breakers in the more dangerous places, for slate picking is possibly attended with less danger than any other operation around a coal mine. The difference was due wholly to the fact that the men were men and the boys were boys. There they sit nine hours a day bending over the coal chutes in one of those large breakers towering perhaps 150 feet above the mouth of the mine shaft, where they may clean ten or fifteen or twenty-five thousand tons of coal in a single day. As the coal comes from the great grinding machine at the top of the building and then off through the chutes to the coal cars, these men and boys watch as it passes down the chutes, picking out the slate and other refuse so that the coal will be clean.

When a man sits for nine hours a day picking slate, if anything happens in the coal mine to stop the operation for five minutes, he sits up and stretches his back and rests, because he already has deposits of lime in his spine, and it begins to stiffen when he sits for a long time.

When a 14 or 13 or 12-year-old boy sees the coal chute running empty for five minutes, does he straighten his back and

rest? No, he strikes the next boy on the back and there is a game of tag on in a minute; and these little boys, 40 or 50, perhaps a hundred of them, are scurrying around like rats over this darkened building with coal dust so dense at times that one cannot see at six feet distant, and the first thing you know one stumbles and falls headlong into the great grinding machinery with its steel jaws that crush and kill, and is ground to pulp before he can be rescued, as a little boy was at Wilkesbarre just a short time ago, a boy between 10 and 11 years old. Or, he may stumble and fall in the great coal hopper and be buried beneath fifty tons of coal before they can stop the machinery, as happened to a little boy in Pittston a few years ago. I speak of these simply to illustrate the difference between the boy and the man.

Someone has to pay for these losses. Up to the present time, the home of the child has borne the brunt of the burden; but times will change, and they are changing with rapidity. The spirit of equalizing the burden of industrial accidents is abroad in the land, and it is striking some of our communities with a force that cannot be resisted. The time is coming, if it has not come already, when all over the country people will recognize that the principal share of the burden for industrial accidents should fall upon the industry as such, and that it should not fall upon the impoverished home of the hapless victim.

Many leading manufacturers of the country are already committed to this principle. They recognize its justice but they say, "We must adjust our business, we must adjust our relations with our employees on a new basis. If we are to be held responsible for this, which we recognize we ought to be, there must be some new kind of adjustment." The principle which casualty companies have already recognized, which child labor reformers have already recognized, which the so-called theorists have been harping on for years, will be recognized by these men in large industrial operations that, from the standpoint of industrial cost, it does not pay to try to run a kindergarten in a coal breaker, or in a coal mine; it does not pay to have little boys, lacking in caution, in discretion, in foresight, employed in a phase of industry that brings them daily into contact with occasions for the most serious accidents.

So I trust that in the development of this new coal industry

in the Birmingham region, and in other parts of the South, you citizens of Birmingham who may have friends in that industry, or acquaintances interested directly or indirectly, will try to call to their attention some of these newer principles that are coming to the front. Show them that just as Pennsylvania saw that it did not pay to have little girls and women employed in coal mines, and as they have learned step by step to eliminate the 8-year-old and the 9-year-old, and the 10-year-old boy in favor of the higher ages, because of the higher industrial advantage to themselves as well as the higher humanitarian considerations, they in the Birmingham region should start on a still higher plane.

Do not begin where the Pennsylvania operator began. Do not repeat the mistakes he made. Do not have to learn all this by pathetic, tragic experience—the costly lessons that some of our northern communities have been trying to unlearn for the past fifty years; but start upon the plane of the highest development that has been realized anywhere and make the coal industry of this community a blessing, as it should be, and not a curse, as it has been in some other parts of the world; and let it be an advantage and an opportunity not only to those who participate in the stockholders' dividends, but to those and their families who participate in the manual toil, which is just as essential as the machinery and equipment to the production of this commodity.